



JOSE ROSALES 2022-10-09

## FIGURING A WOMEN'S REVOLUTION: BODIES INTERACTING WITH THEIR IMAGES

NONPOLITICS FEATURED, FEMINISM, IRAN, REVOLT

*The English translation of this incredible text, written  
by L, was originally posted here via Jadaliyya*

*[Translated by Alireza Doostdar.] [2]*

*For Zhina, for Niloofar, for Elaheh, for Mahsa, for Elmira, and for those whose names I have yet to*

*call.*

Is the uprising in Iran a feminist revolution?

This essay is an attempt to understand an intuition born of experiencing a gap: A gap between viewing photos and videos of protests online, and presence in the street. It's an effort to explicate the short-circuit that courses in the opening between these two domains—virtual space and the reality of the street—in this historic moment. [3]

The protests reached my small town within days of their outbreak in Kurdistan and only two days after they erupted in Tehran. For several days, I was exposed to video recordings of the people's street protests, their exciting songs, and the photos and figures of women protestors. On Wednesday, I finally found myself amidst a street protest. The first moments of being "there," in the street, surrounded by protestors, were extremely strange. Only a day earlier, I had watched these protestors from behind a cellphone screen, marveling at their courage, choking up, and weeping at their actions. I looked around me and tried to synchronize the images of the street with the reality of the street. What I saw firsthand was very similar to what I had previously viewed on screen, but there was a gap between the spectator-I and the I-in-the-street that took a few short moments to recognize. For me, the street was no longer a site of fear but an ordinary space [*faza-ye 'adi*]. Everything was ordinary, even when the security forces attacked us with their batons, bullets, and tasers. I don't know how to explain the word "ordinary" or what better term I might use. The space between me and the images I had desired had grown very small. I myself was those images. I would suddenly see myself in a circle burning headscarves, as though we had always been burning scarves. I would suddenly become conscious of myself and would realize that I was being beaten just a few moments earlier.

Being beaten was, in reality, a lot more ordinary than what I had seen on screen. There was no trace of the pain I had imagined when watching the videos. The body is "warm" when it is being beaten, and we don't experience pain in the way we might expect. We had seen numerous videos of bodies riddled with pellets, but those who have been shot with pellet guns say that they are not that painful or terrifying.

In the street, you suddenly think that you should run and realize that you have already begun to run. You say to yourself that you should light a cigarette and you see that you are "there" among the people, smoking a cigarette. [4] The body has moved faster than perception and the two have not yet synchronized. I even think that death is not frightening for a person who has experienced being in the street. The experience of the street suspends thought about death, and this is what creates fear for observers: Seeing people who are ready to die. We are ready to die. No, we are not even ready. We have been liberated from thinking about death. We have left death behind us, in the intimacy of encountering our fears and running ahead of them in the warmth of the body.

I once received loud cheers when I escaped a scene of confrontation with security forces and ran into the crowd. Walking home late at night, a passing motorcycle deliveryman would flash a victory sign at me or shout encouragement. I was still preoccupied with the moment. I wasn't fully

aware of the reason for the praise and the encouragement. The next morning when I was looking over my bruises in the mirror, the details of the confrontation suddenly passed before my eyes. It was as if I had abruptly remembered a dream that, a moment ago, I was not aware I had seen. My body had cooled down and my mind had gotten to work. I had not simply been beaten; I had also resisted and threw a few punches and kicks. My body had unconsciously performed those things I had seen other protestors do. I remembered the astonished faces of the guards trying to subdue me. My memory had just now, after a time interval, reached my body.

For me, the palpable difference between this protest and the protests I had experienced before was a passage from the "movement of a crowd" to the "creation of a situation." Each time, in the short interval before the arrival of the forces of repression, a gathering of protestors would form around a situation to create something. With the arrival of the forces, depending on the circumstances of the street and its surrounding alleys, the gathering would disperse after a confrontation, only to re-form in a different location. These situations were created when the protestors blocked a street; burning a garbage disposal bin in the middle of the street and bringing traffic to a standstill. Within this short window of opportunity, the active but not-so-large crowd would rapidly attempt to create a situation. "Now let's burn the headscarves." A woman would jump on top of a trash bin, face the cars and lift up her fist, fixed in that figure [*figur*] for a few seconds. Another woman would jump on top of a car and wave her headscarf in the air. A few middle-aged women would stay with the nucleus of the group from beginning to end, rapidly moving to help release people when they were arrested.

Everybody wanted to join the mass of images they had seen in protest videos from the previous days and from people in other cities. Very few people shouted slogans in these moments. I could clearly see this "desire" [*meyl*] to become "that image" [*tasvir*], that image of resistance that the people of my city had seen in previous days. In what follows I want to explore this same "desire" to answer the question of what makes this a feminist revolution.

As I wrote, these protests are not crowd-centered but situation-centered, not slogan-centered but figure-centered. Anybody, and I really mean anybody, "can" create an unbelievable, radical situation of resistance by themselves, such that it astonishes the viewer. Belief in this "I can," this ability, has spread very far. Everybody knows that they are creating an unforgettable situation with their figures of resistance. People, and especially women—these tenacious and headstrong seekers of their desires—are going after this new desire hard, and this same desire increasingly drives forward a chain of stimulating further desires to create figures and situations of resistance: I want to be that woman with the figure of resistance, the one I saw in the photo, and I create a figure. These figures were already present in the unconscious of the protestors without ever having been practiced, as though they had been practicing them for years. This figure of resistance, this body recorded in images, becomes, in later links of the stimulating chain of desires, an incitement of other women's desire to strike their own figures. Oh what desires have been released during these days from the prison-house of our bodies, we women!

I want to counterpose that vector of force that mobilized a crowd for the protests of 2009, for example, to these points of stimulation, the scattered and multiple points of arousal in the street.

Like the female orgasm, these points of stimulation are neither focused nor restricted to any point in the body/street. If I want to call this uprising a feminist uprising, I need to look for something beyond the starting point of the protests, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" slogan, and the call by women activists inside the country to the initial gathering. Besides all of these, what has extended this uprising in a feminine and feminist form and now arouses women's desires the world over, is the plural, figurative stimulation points in protesting bodies: Figures that protestors visibly desire to become, such that it's no longer possible to go to the street without striking the figure of one of those disobedient, rebellious, resisting bodies. Whether it's on top of a car, on top of a trash bin, burning a headscarf, freeing a detained protestor, or standing defiant before the forces of repression.

The images we women have seen of other resisting women have granted us a new understanding of our bodies. I think that the singularity of this feminist resistance and its figurative character made it such that, from the outset, what became iconic were screenshots and photographs rather than videos. Photographs were published on a mass scale that made us proud and were rapidly etched on our collective memory, such that one can write the chronology of this uprising through a history of the images published every day. Photographs that stimulated this uprising and drove it forward: The photo of Zhina [Mahsa] Amini on the hospital bed. The photo of Zhina's relatives holding each other in grief in the hospital. The image of Kurdish women in the Aychi cemetery, waving their headscarves in the air. What we want to see of that entire event: That instant when the headscarves are suspended in their fluttering, their swaying in the air. The photograph of Zhina's gravestone. The figure of the torch-bearing woman of Keshavarz Boulevard. The figure of the woman standing solo in the street, facing the water cannon in Vali Asr Circle. The figure of the sitting woman. The figure of the standing woman. The figure of the woman carrying a sign in Tabriz, eye-to-eye with the forces of repression. The figure of the woman who ties her hair. The picture of the dance circle around a bonfire in Bandar Abbas. And so many others.

What gives a photograph this astonishing power to stimulate as compared with a video? The time imprisoned in the photo. The time imprisoned in the photograph makes it dense, a carrier of the entire history in which that body has been subjugated. The uprising of women in Iran is a photo-centered uprising. What is it that extends this feminist trace and does not let it disappear? After Zhina's name, after "Woman, Life, Freedom," while the volume of repression is so high that crowds often cannot take shape, it's the figures of women's resistance that continue to make this uprising a feminist uprising. This imprisoned time makes a linear narrative of history problematic and highlights, in its stead, a topology of the situation; the gestures, the moments, and the micro-struggle that we have been fighting every day. "#For" that moment and all those moments. [5] Not for that general narrative, but for everything small. For those fleeting micro-moments, for taking them back, for that lump in the throat, for that fear, for that excitement, for that word, for that instant that continues till now, that has dragged itself to today, concealed itself under our skin, beneath our nails, in the lump of our throats. The present perfect: The time of the photographs is the present perfect. It arouses desires, brings the past to life, extends it until a second ago, and in the moment of now, it hands the marathon of instants over to the next

moment, the next photo, and the next figure.



In truth, what distinguishes this uprising as feminist is this figure-centered character; the possibility of creating images that do not necessarily capture the intensity of conflict, the cruelty of repression, or the unfolding of events, but instead carry the history of bodies. A pause, an arrest. See this body, observe the entirety of this history. Here. The figure of the torch-bearing woman, a self-sufficient carrier of history without reference to the seconds before or after it. The history of this body is not narrated in a linear temporal continuum on a video meant to represent repression or confrontation or action, but instead crystallizes in a revolutionary instant. Pause on the moment when the woman lifts her torched headscarf and flashes the sign of victory. The movement of eyes along the width of the image, the glare of the car's headlights behind her, the raised hands, the smiling face of the man standing to her right, the trees along the street. A figure, pause. There is no need for the before and after of this moment in a video recording because the figure is created not in a temporal continuum but in a historic arrest, in a pause. It's where the heart of history stops beating for a second.

These moments and figures are self-sufficient in representing the history of the repression of women's bodies. And this is the quality that distinguishes this uprising. The feminist uprising of



bodies and figures. The feminist character of these protests is in opening the possibility of creating these figurative images. These images-cum-icons reciprocally affect the desire to fill space with such images. I personally witnessed this desire to display. Bodies that wanted to be “that” figure, had seen that their bodies possessed the capacity to become that figure. Bodies that therefore endangered themselves, entered the fray, struck that figure. In a field where there are few opportunities to take up space, they sought the chance to create moments of resistance.

We had seen images of resisting women before; pictures of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Syrian Kurdistan, for example. The difference between those photos and the figures of women in the recent protests is the centrality of the face in the former and the facelessnessness of the latter. The particularity of the first with its weapons and combat gear, versus the generality of the second with its everyday attire. Closeups of beautiful faces in the garb of resistance (the desire of the photographer) have given way to images of figures of resistance (the desire of the subject). “I want you to see me this way”: Images of uncovered hair with clenched fists. The figure of bodies on trash bins and automobiles.



These figures recall Vida Movahhed and other “Girls of Enqelab Street.” [6] Vida seems to have been a turning point in the evolution of representations of Iranian women's struggle against the mandatory hijab. A departure point, away from the message-centered, face-centered videos of “White Wednesdays”—mostly selfies of women walking on the street and saying something to explicate the situation and their desires. [7] Vida Movahhed became the dense figure of all the videos before her that women had uploaded of walking without hijab. In contrast to these women, she was silent, fixed. The point of transition from video to photograph. A transition from the narration of an everyday circumstance to the creation of a historic situation. A shift from an individual speaking about herself and her desire, to a silent, fixed figure. A figure of resistance. Here, the image of the protesting woman pulled herself out of the video's temporal continuum, leaped away from the representation of everyday circumstance, and landed on the dense stage

of historic performativity. Vida Movahhed, that unknown woman, was not Vida Movahhed but a picture of a revolutionary figure. The figure of all the women before her and a stimulus for women's figures after her.

In an endless cycle, image and figure transform into one another. Images are published and distributed, and they arouse the imagination of bodies. People thereafter go to the street not with the bodies that they are, but with the bodies that they can and want to be. With their own imagination. Their revolutionary act is to incarnate this imagination. In truth, in this tying-together of image and street, representation and reality mutually orient one another. Dream/representation/incarnation can impose itself on reality. Becoming that image, and at the same time, arousing the desire of other bodies to become. The chain of images: "the short-circuiting of the street with virtual space."

Alongside these individual figures, we also witnessed collective figures. The circle of headscarf burning. The dance circle around the bonfire that traveled from Sari to other cities. We see the repetition of collective figures, without it being possible anymore to determine the location to which each gathering belongs. In the initial days of the protests, a short video circulated of a small gathering of protesting women in Paveh. A small and lonely group of women walking from the end of a street. This small group, whose gathering seemed highly perilous, appeared to me to be very similar to women's gatherings in Afghanistan. That historic situation brings two images together, unites two collectives.





[ZHINA [MAHSA] AMINI'S GRAVESTONE. THE PHOTOGRAPHER IS ELAHEH MOHAMMADI, WHO IS ALSO IMPRISONED NOW BECAUSE OF HER JOURNALISM.]

Many images are never born because they are not taken. Numerous images never “take” because they do not give rise to a protest. How is it, then, that these specific figures “took”? (instead of being photographs that were “taken”?) The figures “took” because they were a



historic mirror for women. I think that in place of the initial statement "I could also have been Zhina" [in other words: I could also have died in the custody of the morality police], the image of the torch-bearing woman on the car aroused an intense desire that "I also want to be that figure." The desire to express that figure of promise. And it was that figure that not only stimulated that desire, but drove women's bodies to express, and to cleanse the rust [*zangar*] from the mirror before them. Although this desire was stimulated through an image, it became a blossoming revolutionary desire by virtue of the history that the body carried. This figurative desire is the distinguishing feature of the feminist uprising. The outbreak of a repressed history. Giving birth to a body we have been pregnant with for years.

The figures we had seen previously of well-known politically active women forestalled the activation of political power and its distribution because they foregrounded the activists' faces and names. Faces and names abort the figure's power to arouse the desires of other women because they render the situation of that figure different, and special, compared to the general situation of women. Now, the figure has freed itself from the bondage of the face. It is a general, faceless figure, covered with a mask, effaced for reasons of security, an image shot from behind, nameless, anonymous. The political body of women now circulates on the streets.

From the beautiful body to the inspiring figure. From the body imprisoned in beauty to the body freed in the figure. This is not a transformation of the self into an ideal body, but the creation of a new figure of resistance each time and in every single body. While the body has been aroused by and takes inspiration from previous figures whose images it has seen in virtual space, it creates a new figure and reciprocally inspires future figures. The chain of stimulation and inspiration. This figure has released women from captivity in the body and its historic subjugation, and has made the body flourish in its wake. A body that has only now discovered the possibility, the beauty, of its own resistance: **maturing anew.**

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Referring to the byline of this article: My beloved once chose to title a project "L" that may or may not have been referring to me. Engrossed in the experience of this revolutionary space, so akin to the experience of love, I want to push aside my constant hesitation about this L's reference, and instead own it along with my beloved's gesture. My signing of this essay as L is a revolutionary appropriation of his gesture. This naming not only keeps me secure from the threats of government forces, but frees me in my idea of love, at the very moment that names have become symbols [a reference to Mahsa Amini's name, and the oft-repeated call, near impossible to translate, that "Your name has become a symbol"].
2. Translator's note: This is a translation of an essay originally posted to [harasswatch.com](https://harasswatch.com) on Wednesday, September 28. The English version has been slightly modified from the original with input from the author.
3. In an electric circuit, a short circuit is an unusual connection between two nodes with different voltages that causes a higher-than-expected current to pass through. In the analysis of circuits, a short circuit is a connection that forces two nodes with different potentials into equal potential. In truth, it's a connective path between two parts of an electric circuit that can cause a current thousands of times higher than what is ordinarily expected of the circuit.

4. This sentence comes from a passage I wrote to my beloved after I watched a viral video of the opening of the gates of Qasr Prison and the freeing of political prisoners months before the 1979 Revolution. I wrote this on August 2, 2020:

"Tonight I saw the video of the freeing of prisoners on the internet. Again and again. Would that I could be the one brushing that woman's hair aside from her forehead? How can one feel joy? How slippery it is. The moment when you feel something like inspiration in your heart, you think you are happy, but as soon as you lift your head up you see that you are a person who was once happy and now the inability to understand that fleeting emotion makes everything incomprehensible. There was so much joy in that video. What an atmosphere. You need not say anything. It's enough to brush aside the hair from the forehead in front of you to recognize her and become certain that she is there, and it's you who reveals her face.

Is it you?

Yes, it's me.

A face for everyone. A liberated face whose emotions have not been repressed, weeping and laughing. Weeping as she laughs. A kind of emotional attack. A face that cannot yet discern joy or a transformed situation. The moment when everything is in flux. The instant of revolution. Not a moment before and not a moment after. The suspenseful situation, the situation of becoming. How can you recognize someone in the crowd in the moment of revolution? When every organ of the body goes beyond its self-awareness and the ways it has learned to be. By brushing aside the hair and seeking a rare memory. A black mole next to the right ear. Then you say to yourself that you should light a cigarette, and you see yourself there, smoking a cigarette. You say: I should get going, and you see yourself in the crowd. You've been there the whole time."

I now make this private letter common property in these revolutionary conditions



This letter no longer belongs only to my beloved, but to all the bodies on the street that I have loved so dearly.

5. Translator's note: "#barayeh" refers to a recent Twitter trend in which thousands of people wrote of all the things that motivated them to support the protests. "For" the students who were denied the right to study. "For" murdered intellectuals. "For" the joy denied to the war generation. "For" the workers of the Haft Tappeh sugarcane factory. And thousands of other "for"s. Shortly after the trend took off, the young singer Shervin Hajipour recorded a song titled "For" (*barayeh*) whose lyrics mostly consisted of paraphrased Twitter posts. His music video was an instant hit. The authorities arrested him shortly thereafter, but his song has now become one of the anthems of the uprising.
6. Translator's note: Vida Movahhed is a woman whose silent action against the mandatory hijab inspired a wave of similar actions by protestors who came to be known as the "Girls of Enqelab [Revolution] Street." In late December 2017, Movahhed climbed a utility box at a busy intersection on Enqelab Street, tied her white headscarf on a stick, and held it aloft. She was arrested and later sentenced to a year in prison. While she largely disappeared from public view afterward, her pose with the headscarf on a stick has become a visual icon of women's civil disobedience.



7. Translator's note: "White Wednesdays" was a 2017 internet campaign begun by Masih Alinejad in which women would record selfie videos of themselves taking off the hijab in public spaces in Iran. They would send the videos to Alinejad who would then share them online.

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